

Collecting Quality Data and Reducing the Burden on Schools and Districts

Background - the Challenge

The *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* holds states, districts, and schools accountable for student achievement. In order to demonstrate progress, states, districts, and schools must be able to collect and manage their student data. Currently, however, the ability of school districts to collect and manage data varies widely across the state. In addition, state collections of education data have for many years been governed by often overlapping and duplicative state and federal legislative requirements. An April 2002 California Department of Finance study found that the California Department of Education (CDE) did not know the extent of the data it collects, manages, and stores. In addition, it was discovered that CDE lacked a common system for naming and defining the data collected.

Current Status

Since then, CDE has established a central office that is responsible for developing an on-line catalog of data sources and a common system for naming and defining its data. This office has conducted a high-level survey of CDE's data collections, databases, and mandated reports and has listed them in CDE's on-line catalog, known as the Data Resource Guide. Based on this information, CDE administers 137 data collections.¹ Seven out of 10 of those data collections are a result of federal or state mandated programs. Of the remaining non-mandated collections, some are required for administrative purposes or public information (e.g., the *California School Directory*).

¹ Source: CDE's Data Resource Guide, an on-line catalog of CDE's data sources (as of January 23, 2004). These numbers are subject to change due to the dynamic nature of new reporting requirements and data collections being eliminated or consolidated.

Next Steps

One of State Superintendent Jack O'Connell's top three priorities this year will be to reduce the reporting burden that CDE, the California State Legislature and the federal government impose on local education agencies (LEAs) and schools by:

- eliminating all data collections that are not mandated or required for administrative purposes by June 30;
- reducing the frequency of data collections (37 percent of data collections are collected more than once per year);²
- standardizing data, that is, asking for the same data in the same way;
- moving data collections to individual-level (e.g., student, teacher) data collections, thereby, making it possible to meet changing information demands without having to create new data collections (32 percent of CDE's data collections are at the student level);
- consolidating mandated data collections, where feasible, and eliminating non-mandated sections of mandated data collections; and working with the Legislature to identify mandated data collections that serve no purpose and revise laws that allow CDE to discontinue those data collections.

Later this month, CDE will release the first phase of its Data Resource Guide on the department's Web site, making it possible for other state agencies to assess which data collections might be candidates for elimination.

Two years ago, the CDE transitioned the *Consolidated Application For Funding Categorical Aid Programs* from a paper process to an electronic process. This application is submitted twice each year by more than 1,200 local education agencies. As a result of this transition, it estimated that the department saves approximately \$600,000 annually by reducing staff hours, mailing expenses, and paper reproduction (approximately 45,000 pages). It is estimated that this transition also saves local education agencies approximately \$1.5 million by reducing staff hours, mailing expenses and paper reproduction (approximately 75,000 pages since the local agencies submitted three copies).

² Note: in some cases, this may require a change to legislative reporting times.

Similar savings can be realized by transitioning other large documents into an automated process. Within three years, the department is committed to automating all on-going, mandated, paper-based data collections. This will increase data accuracy, quality, and timeliness (63 percent of CDE's data collections use a paper-based submission option).³ Automation will also ensure that data are checked on entry, eliminating delays in correcting questionable data.

Improving Data Collections at the Local Level

Districts also need to standardize their data collection practices and integrate data collection and maintenance activities into their working environment and culture.

One prudent way to build the education data infrastructure at the local level is to leverage the investment the state already has made in the California School Information Services (CSIS) program, which was created in 1997. Districts participating in CSIS maintain their student information in local databases and then submit their individual records to CSIS to aggregate into required state reports. Currently, participation in CSIS is voluntary, with only 200 of California's more than 1,000 districts participating.

To give all of California's school districts the opportunity to participate in CSIS over the next five years would cost an estimated \$92 million. This would enable automated, systematic collection and reporting of a minimum of 10 key aggregate reports and electronic records transfer activities for all of California's 1,056 K-12 school districts and six million students.⁴ This is approximately .0005 of the current state budget for education (\$38 billion) each year.

³ This timeline is constrained by formal state IT reporting requirements.

⁴ Note: Additional aggregate state reporting requirements may be derived and met with the same set of data that LEAs submit for the 10 key reports. An analysis would inform the CDE and stakeholders which other reports, or portions of reports, could be derived from this data, *thus further reducing the LEA reporting burden*. Additionally, the analysis would inform which new data elements if added to the LEA submissions, would meet additional report requirements. Not all elements are equal – we would target adding elements that provided the greatest report burden reduction for all 1,056 LEAs.

Benefits of Building an Education Data Superhighway

- CSIS' approximate \$50 million investment to date has set the foundation for California to begin to realize economies of scale – one-time costs have established repeatable processes from which to increase the ability to generate additional aggregate reports with fewer additional data elements;
- A uniform statewide data system will empower education researchers to connect student performance, program effectiveness, and teacher education and training. Trends revealed in the data could direct the state to lean toward certain combinations of teacher training and program exposure to improve student achievement – a more cost effective and reasonable means for improving California pupil achievement;
- Local school districts will be able to use the data for meeting local stakeholder needs, and for uncovering critical variables that impact student success;
- Districts and programs will be able to track when students move from one school district to another because their parent or guardian took employment in another city (important for special education, migrant education, and other critical programs);
- Small local education agencies will be able to use a Web based program to “key in” and maintain important data about their students (a net benefit for 16 percent of California’s small districts that do not currently use automated means for maintaining student data);
- More accurate and auditable school district data –fewer opportunities for local agencies to report inaccurate data;
- Reduction in the reporting burden at the local level. While in the beginning it is relatively more expensive to go from a paper and pencil report to maintaining an IT system of data, economies of scale will come into play when in the future school districts are able to meet multiple state reporting requirements from one data submission;
- The ability to inform the Legislature about which newly proposed state or federal data collection requirements can be met using *existing* data element submissions from local agencies participating in CSIS;
- Reduction in some CDE operations costs and vendor contracts; and
- Creation of a uniform statewide data definition for a core set of critical local education agency data.